



TV and American Culture

Introduction

David M. Katzman

“TV and American Culture” is our second topical summer issue following our exploration of American studies and cultural studies in 1997. Examining TV and its impact on the United States is as compelling as any contemporary issue. Though often studied within popular culture, television has been transformed by and has touched nearly every aspect of American life and institutions. As the articles in this issue attest, TV encompasses public and private spheres, individual identity and public policy, the arts and politics, and the constellation of race, ethnic, gender, sexual, class, regional, family, community, and religious issues through which we often view the United States.

Bill Graebner initiated the issue when he solicited four papers from a 1996 American Studies Association session, “The Personal is Professional on TV.” Graebner critiqued the papers, and the authors revised them for submission to *American Studies*. Graebner read them again, and he and Shirley Wadja read and responded to every manuscript submitted for this special TV issue. Other readers too contributed to shaping this issue, but Graebner’s and Wadja’s insightful readings helped improve and broaden the conversation we present here.

“TV and American Culture” offers individual case studies that, taken together, reveal both the range of scholarly interest in television and how television has come to be as central to many Americans as live performance, print, and movies had been to earlier generations. Though novelists and poets, stage actors and dancers, and musicians and visual artists create whole worlds that speak to millions of Americans, even more people are absorbed by the universes represented on TV. As these essays demonstrate, a newer generation of scholars,

raised as television viewers, find in TV meanings that my generation—the last before the baby boomers—often finds difficult to grasp or neglects to take seriously.

The contributors to “TV and American Culture” take TV seriously. They enter into the worlds represented visually and aurally on television, and those worlds enter their lives. They write assuming that all of their readers have watched the programs under discussion. TV and the popular shows on TV are, to this generation, as ubiquitous as the Bible and Shakespeare were to nineteenth-century American audiences. In the nineteenth century, daily conversations and public rhetoric made allusions to Hamlet and Ruth and Naomi in similar ways that *I Love Lucy*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *As the World Turns*, *General Hospital*, *The Tonight Show*, *Murphy Brown*, *Seinfeld*, *The X-Files*, *90210*, *ER*, and *Friends*, have become part of general conversations, shared knowledge, and public discourse over the last half century.

Judy Kutulas, as do most of the authors in this issue, describes television as holding up a mirror to American life and experiences. She finds represented on the small screen such important 1990s concerns as gender relations and such intimate ones as the birthing process. In looking at how maternity and birth are represented in situation comedies, Kutulas argues that TV has documented the extraordinary tensions and changes Americans underwent in the last half of the twentieth century.

The television shows themselves, especially the situation comedies Kutulas discusses, entertained generations of Americans. On the one hand, they were ephemeral; their seasons were short, though some have had extended life in reruns. On the other hand, as with other forms of popular culture, they reveal the structures and relationships of American life. As Kutulas and our other authors demonstrate, TV is a text to be examined and analyzed just as the writing on a page. Thus Kutulas argues that on TV “programming is a trope for explaining our cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity,” and affirms Gramsci’s exploration of the dialect between culture and ideology.

Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith start with some of the same “texts”—*I Love Lucy* and *Murphy Brown*—that Judy Kutulas has examined. They too find compelling the birth narratives represented on these TV shows. They also find significant the changing TV representation of gender. In the process they contextualize television in American life, juxtaposing *I Love Lucy* with President Dwight Eisenhower’s inaugural address, and examine a later time when Americans themselves began to explore the relationship between American life and how it was represented on TV in situation comedies. Vice President Dan Quayle, in attacking the representation of maternity on *Murphy Brown*, prompted political debate and serious discussion on how American life and TV were related. Scholars took up these themes, and continue to do so.

But if TV’s exploration of gendered and feminist perspectives have opened up new channels, Davies and Smith suggest, they have come at the “cost of largely

reproducing the white-centeredness of television.” The national debate on women’s roles, family, and maternity, in which both politicians and TV shows have participated, has assumed racial and ethnic homogeneity. Davies and Smith begin by focusing on the 1950s, using as case studies two *Lucy* shows, “Lucy Hires an English Tutor,” and “Lucy Goes to the Hospital.” In the first show, Davies and Smith provide a case study of the 1950s representation of a working mother and explore her relationship to notions of gender and ethnicity. In the second they examine the “racial signification of Ricky’s appearance” in blackface.

In shifting to *Murphy Brown* and its 1990s representation of maternity, feminism, and postfeminism, Davies and Smith find significant change and areas where things have remained the same. One area of continuity has been the marginalization of black people. As Davies and Smith indicate, despite the presence of black-centered TV situation comedies, “the meanings generated by the representations of African Americans in *Murphy Brown* are nearer to those of the 1950s than might be supposed from the show’s avowed social liberalism.” In effect, TV preserved “dominant white control of the category of race itself.” Vice President Dan Quayle commented publicly on the show, and it entered part of the national discourse on “whiteness and national identity.”

Danae Clark, in analyzing television’s treatment of a specific public issue—adoption—explores the various roles the medium plays in American life. As adoption became a concern of the public and policy makers in the 1980s and 1990s, a wide range of media gave it exposure, from public radio to the Cable News Network and from talk shows and soap operas to made-for-TV movies and shows like *ER*. But TV and other popular media, according to Clark, tend “to foreground novelty and immediacy,” thus ignoring historical and socio-economic contexts. TV in highlighting adoption engaged in “therapeutic discourse.”

Therapeutic discourse, as practiced on television, focuses on the immediacy of issues; it copes with the problem, not its underlying causes. Television lends itself well to dramatizing issues and engaging the public. Clark suggests that when TV represents adoption there is little difference between entertainment shows—soap operas, serial programs, and made-for-TV movies—and news broadcasts, news magazines, and talk shows. Indeed, the latter shows are “particularly suited to the discourse of therapy.” As do entertainment shows, news shows seek to entertain and move people emotionally. The therapeutic mode views problems from an experiential or personal viewpoint rather than from a professional or detached perspective. On television, those who have experienced a problem become the experts.

To Clark, the therapeutic discourse, while engaging audiences and providing some emotional satisfaction to viewers, directs public concern away from basic structural and cultural issues. It ignores how and why problems arise and neglects the historical context. Adoption in particular ignores the socio-economic context and directs attention away from a racial context. None of this is surprising, Clark argues, as she contextualizes television within a capitalist economy. In doing so

Clark challenges the common distinctions drawn between the entertainment and informational roles of television.

In separate articles under the broad rubric, “The Personal is Professional on TV,” Charlie Bertsch, Gillian Epstein, Annalee Newitz, and Jillian Sandell provide a close reading of four contemporary television shows popular with college students and young people: *ER*, *The X-Files*, *90210*, and *Friends*. A basic assumption of each article is that television represents “a conglomerate of contemporary United States social fantasies about work, identity, and interpersonal relationships.”

TV, they suggest, blurs the boundaries between what is professional and personal, what is public and private. Moreover, they imply, in American life those distinctions have become blurred. A further axiom, we might infer, is that for younger people the distinction between TV and American life itself is becoming blurred. Within the context of their research, TV has meaning so personal that any representation of the professional becomes personal.

Charlie Bertsch shows how *The X-Files* takes a traditional genre—mysteries and detectives—but gives it a contemporary (postmodern) twist by resisting narrative closure. Another contemporary theme is found in its portrayal of work (the professional) and home (the personal). Home/workplace becomes one: a homeless home. In the late twentieth century technology and economic structures make the personal vulnerable and work all encompassing. But, as Bertsch notes, in *The X-Files* both protagonists engage in personal quests; thus the blurring of distinctions is driven by personal factors as well.

A critical context through which to understand *The X-Files*, Bertsch argues, is contemporary capitalism. Work comes to dominate the lives of the middle class and they become alienated from their work. *The X-Files*' protagonists are the very opposite; they control their work and tasks, making them challenging and creative. Nothing in their lives is routine; they escape being drones.

Gillian Epstein, too, challenges the distinction between the personal and the professional. She finds that *90210* occupies a liminal or hybrid space or “special sphere,” one that mixes both the public and private arenas. A close reading of one 1996 episode, focusing on the airing of a music video, maps that space. Epstein both interprets the script and provides a viewer's (reader's) response as she narrates the episode from the perspective of a viewer. Offering the equivalent almost of “frame analysis” of a single *90210* show, Epstein “reads” the show as a dynamic visual/aural representation, not as a static printed text. The levels of analysis include the script, camera cuts, and the viewers' gaze.

The single episode of *90210* that Epstein has chosen lends itself to this analysis. We watch the protagonists themselves viewing the music video on TV. We do not share with them this experience because we do not see the video very often, and as Epstein points out, the camera cuts to them first, before we see what they are watching. Instead, we are voyeurs, experiencing the show within the show (TV within TV) only secondhand. As we watch teenagers watching a music

video, as we observe the consumption of television, the distinction between personal and professional, between private and public becomes blurred.

Where Gillian Epstein focuses on a private situation—the watching of a music video—and reveals how it is saturated with public meaning, Annalee Newitz focuses on professionals in *ER* to show how the program infuses the personal into the professional. *ER* is in a long TV tradition of shows in which the workplace takes on the attributes of a family. But the “work-family” on *ER* “does not always behave like a family unit—there is often a chilly, professional distance between colleagues, and the business of working (rather than personal bonding) is stressed far more than in work-family sitcoms of the past.”

Newitz suggests that *ER* has contemporary appeal because it takes place “right where work and family meet.” It addresses American anxieties generated by changes the family and workplace are undergoing; the family and work environments and relationships are widely perceived to be dysfunctional and rapidly declining. The work-family, as represented on *ER* often combines the worst of both spheres. As a family “guilt, repressed sexuality, aggression, and sheer infantile needfulness” bound them together; as a workplace, injustice and corruption were common, and harm was done to patients.

Unlike *Murphy Brown* and other television shows, which represent the workplace as a utopian family community, *ER*, Newitz argues, maps out three unsatisfying social realms: “pure work,” “pure family,” and “hybrid work-family.” Pure work produces conflict and tension, and inadequate patient care. Pure family provides no haven, for “each time we venture into a character’s private life the results are worse than disastrous.” The hybrid space of work-family, on which the show centers, merely intensifies the problems of work and family. At its worst, hierarchical relationships—the hospital chain of command and the social structure of the family—replace intimacy, love, and collegiality.

Hybrid space is becoming more common in contemporary society, Newitz suggests. *ER* has great appeal because it is helping to define this new space to which we are adapting. The professional and the personal merge in the hybrid space offered on *ER*. The vision offered, however, is a dark one, but the program reflects how both professional and personal spheres are troubled in the 1990s.

Friends, as Jillian Sandell views the weekly situation comedy, does not satisfy Newitz’ notion of pure family. Instead, it offers a fantasy of an alternative family, of young people creating unconventional domestic life by sharing their domestic lives together. “The promise of the show,” Sandell suggests, “is that in the face of heterosexual failure and familial dysfunction, all you need are good friends.”

The sitcom is about the construction of families as voluntary institutions, the “families we choose.” Choice makes them alternate families. The new families “can substitute for badly paid jobs and dysfunctional relationships.” Yet, while there is much representation and exploration of difference in episodes of *Friends*, it still offers a racially and ethnically homogeneous network. Ironically, this

group of six white men and women live in New York City, as multicultural as any place in the United States. Thus in some spheres—sexual and gender roles—it offers a view of changing patterns, while in others—race and class—it perpetuates stereotypes.

Thus, Sandell notes, the audience who can identify with the program is almost entirely white, and they see explored common concerns and anxieties on the weekly episodes. Their own lives are portrayed on the small screen as many, after college, settled in cities distant from their birth families and created, with friends, alternative families. The building of those relationships and the relationships themselves—the personal—become infused with meaning and satisfaction otherwise associated with the workplace world—the professional.

Shantanu DuttaAhmed takes a more skeptical view of television as an interpreter and rule maker in our culture. Most of the authors in this special issue argue for a congruence between television and American life. To DuttaAhmed, *The Real World* is not the real world as Americans experience it. The production company of the San Francisco edition of the show recorded 1400 hours of roommates living together—taping everything but defecation and sex—over a five-month period, edited it down to eleven hours of broadcast time, and serialized it as a soap opera. Our sense of sharing the lives of *The Real World* roommates, the “*video verite*” in DuttaAhmed’s terms, “its ‘documentary’ and ‘ethnographic’ style,” is an illusion, but creating and maintaining that illusion is essential in marketing the show and in maintaining an audience.

DuttaAhmed explores the narrative of Pedro Zamora, a gay activist from Miami, who had AIDS when the show began and died five months after the filming ended. The constructed (“manipulated”) narrative has “this particular trajectory—HIV=AIDS=Death.” As the group moves from strangers to family, *The Real World* must deal with Zamora and his deadly disease. Both the threat of AIDS and its containment are treated within a domestic sphere. Rachel confesses, to the camera and viewer, her fear of catching AIDS—contamination—while Pedro confesses his feelings of rejection. “No attempt is made to counter Rachel’s fears with available, empirical information on AIDS,” DuttaAhmed notes. Her fears are legitimized and we view her desire to contain the disease “as a legitimate response.” Television gives this view authority.

MTV brought closure to Pedro Zamora’s story when, after the broadcasting of the San Francisco episodes of *The Real World*, it aired a special posthumous tribute to him. DuttaAhmed argues that in this presentation AIDS is sanitized for television: “Pedro dies beautiful,” as the “horrors of the process” never register. Moreover, the narrative of Pedro’s homosexuality is a story of “accidental aberrance.” We are left finally with an illusion that television makes possible: Judd, a white heterosexual male, in shedding tears for Pedro, raises Pedro’s death from the particular to the universal. And MTV’s tribute show presents Judd as a surrogate speaking for gays and lesbians, continuing television’s marginalizing of gays.

Kristine McCusker, in examining listener mail and the *National Barn Dance*, a radio show of the 1930s, explores empirically what is only speculated about in the articles on television: the relationship of audience and performers. Radio and television both are interactive media; audiences listen and view them actively, and often become engaged with performers. Using fan mail, responses by performers, and the Chicago radio station's fan magazine, *Stand By!*, McCusker gives us a rare glimpse at how the *National Barn Dance* entered the world of listeners.

Begun as light entertainment in a four state area, the *National Barn Dance* was broadcast nationwide in 1933, in the depths of the depression. The rural to urban migration of the 1920s had left millions of Americans nostalgic for down-home music. Listeners gave personal meaning to the program, and performers responded by incorporating their public personas or their own lives into their acts. Strangers became friends. Listeners, seeking to establish connections with performers, sent gifts to them; listeners and performers exchanged letters. Geography, gender, race, and American domestic manners of the 1930s all influenced these radio friendships.

Radio, the precursor of television, leaves more to the imagination than does television. Television has greater control over viewers through its command of both the aural and visual. Radio allows more imaginative room to listeners because the audience must supply the visual imagery. Perhaps that is why there was a greater demand for visual representations of radio performers and shows; TV offers those visual images whenever the knob is turned. It is with understandable irony that we note that in this special issue of *American Studies* only the article on radio is illustrated. None of our other authors thought it important enough to illustrate their articles.

McCusker, in examining the *National Barn Dance*, contextualizes radio, as did the other authors in exploring television, not only as entertainment, not only as a creative medium, but also as part of American commerce. Television and radio exist as part of a capitalist, market-oriented economy, and they themselves are commodities. Television and radio lend themselves well as commercial media to some issues and concerns but not to others. What TV presents and how it presents it are influenced or determined by market as well as creative concerns.

Technology also influences what television presents and how it presents it. Television creates a sense of *verite*, in the beginning through live broadcasts and now through the illusions created by videotape, which conveys a sense of reality that motion picture film does not. With hand-held cameras, TV even more stresses the immediate, the here and now. Underlying structural and cultural concerns and the larger context are too complex to appear with any frequency on television.

All of this reminds us that television, like any other medium, creates illusions. This issue of *American Studies* reminds us that television (and radio) in mirroring American life and culture deceives us into believing that we are viewing through a looking glass. That much of television presents an America that is homogeneous, slow to change, white-centered, and middle class distorts

much of American society. Or perhaps it does not distort it at all; it represents how Americans view themselves, even if in suppressing much of diversity it is not a very accurate portrait.

The authors share a particular approach to television, one that assumes television is part of everyday life. This special issue offers case studies of popular culture. Reflecting television itself, the analysis privileges the immediacy of the shows over the larger historical or cultural contexts. *American Studies* leaves to other scholars the history of television itself, the competition between radio and television, between movies and television, and between newspapers and television. While the authors contextualize television as a commodity, none explores television as a workplace nor do they examine the corporate structure, for television today is very big business. So too they leave to others to explore how television has changed American life.

What they do, however, is remind us that we must take television seriously. TV touches every aspect of American life and culture. One cannot examine the United States today without turning on television, analyzing what is on the tube, and studying its viewers.